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ABSTRACT

This article defines school improvement, looks at indicators of quality schools, discusses the characteristics of the middle level child and proposes practical strategies which blend research data and school level practices for the middle level learner. In order to clearly understand the school improvement movement at the middle level, one must be aware of the research and practical implications at the holistic level of public education as described in the research literature. Educational reform reports, research on effective schools, characteristics of the middle level learner, and practical strategies to improve learning must be reviewed, synthesized and blended. The discussion explores the effects of the educational reform reports, the research on effective schools, the characteristics of the middle level learner and the effective strategies that blend the research with the reality of learning. (Author/JD)

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BLENDING RESEARCH AND REALITY - EFFECTIVE MIDDLE LEVEL STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Educators recognize and have accepted the challenge to pursue the achievement of effective schools and school improvement. The responsibility for leadership in improving schools exists at every level. This article defines school improvement, looks at indicators of quality schools, discusses the characteristics of the middle level child and proposes practical strategies which blend research data and school level practices for the middle level learner.

In order to clearly understand the school improvement movement at the middle level, one must be aware of the research and practical implications at the holistic level of public education as described in the research literature. Educational reform reports, research on effective schools, characteristics of the middle level learner, and practical strategies to improve learning must be reviewed, synthesized and blended.

The following discussion explores the effects of the educational reform reports, the research on effective schools, the characteristics of the middle level learner and the effective strategies that blend the research with the reality of learning.

PREMISE FOR CHANGE

Numerous educational reform reports published in the early 1980's communicated concern for the state of American public schools. A Nation at Risk, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) report noted: "For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents." This concern was echoed in conclusions reached in John Naisbitt's Megatrends, Earnest Boyer's High School, Theodore Sizer's Horace's Compromise and John Goodlad's A Place Called School.

During the early phase of educational reform reports, educational researchers, business and community leaders, and state and local school districts began to take a hard look at educational policies, strategies and outcomes. Many of the reports did much more than decry the state of the nation's schooling; they included recommendations for improvement.

SP 031 614

These challenges produced the school improvement initative. Researchers and practitioners joined forces nation-wide to identify and establish perspectives about what would become a description of effective schools and school improvement. Although no one definition seems to be prevelant, effective schools can best be described in terms of what is known about those schools where learning and achievement consistently exceed predictions based on student ability and socio-economic factors.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS RESEARCH

The early efforts of Ronald Edmonds and others at Harvard University have generally been accepted to be the primary forces behind the effective schools research movement. Other prominent contributors have been Lawrence Lezotte, Wilbur Brookover, Jerry Brophy, Thomas Good, and John Goodlad. This body of research has described validated practices and procedures which have been proven to significantly influence student learning.

The issues which were addressed in the early research documents were curricular revision, school climate, student achievement, instructional efficiency, and school leadership.

A more recent phase of research data has discovered more complex issues: thinking skills, cognitive awareness, drop-out prevention, teacher recruitment and entry training, and critical social issues (i.e. drugs and aids education).

Each phase of recent educational research has provided new awareness and direction. Although each establishes different criteria, collectively the literature promotes the same result - quality education.

The research on effective schools has provided the foundation for the implementation of school improvement. Numerous factors have been identified which may contribute to improved learning. These factors or characteristics, which when applied in an organized effort, should be considered a process that moves a school from wherever it is, toward the operation of a more effective quality school. This means improvement of school activities and practices that help students learn, but it also means attention to the indicators of quality schools as identified in the research.

There are probably as many lists of effective school characteristics as there are authors writing about school improvement. The following eight influencing characteristics appear to be the most prevalent catagorization discussed in the research literature (Lee Co., FL, 1985):

(1) Clear and Focused School Mission
(2) Safe and Orderly Environment
(3) Instructional Leadership
(4) High Expectations for Staff and Students
(5) Opportunity to Learn
(6) Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress
(7) Home/School Partnership
(8) Effective Teaching

The ensuing discussion is not presented as a major compilation of all conditions and practices necessary for school improvement at the middle level. The intent here is to categorize major influences upon school effectiveness from broad reviews of research findings and to provide substantive supporting evidence for these categorical conditions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNER

Since the overwhelming majority of the research on effective schools has been conducted at the elementary and high school levels, it seems appropriate to discuss the inherent characteristics of the middle level learner as they may apply to the research literature.

The ten to fifteen year old child exhibits a unique behavioral pattern. It is important when correlating the application of the effective schools research with the critical needs of the transitional learner that all factors be considered.

The middle level student may be:

(1) influenced more by peer pressure than by parental authority.
(2) confused about who they are.
(3) self-conscious of their physical development.
(4) subject to sudden mood changes.
(5) in need of testing the authority of parents, teachers, and society.
(6) in constant motion - both physical and verbal.
(7) undergoing continuous and various stages of change - physical, emotional, social, and intellectual.
(8) highly questioning.
(9) filled with a need for belonging.

Although the substantive data from the effective school research applies to all levels of public education, it may be important to consider these characteristics as they may apply to the strategies discussed.

EFFECTIVE MIDDLE LEVEL STRATEGIES

A clearly stated and well understood declaration of the school mission provides affirmative direction for the important work of the school. It provides a protective umbrella that wards off well-meaning but non-contributing distractions from the teaching, learning, and mastery of academic priorities.

As Edmonds (1982) found, "It's not only what the school's purpose (or mission) is, but that everyone knows what it is." The school mission should be communicated to the entire school community:

(1) posted throughout the school facility
(2) stated in school newsletter
(3) part of school stationery
(4) verbally addressed to staff, students, parents, and community

Effective schools have a pervasive atmosphere of purpose, respect, and order. Rules and procedures are understood and practiced in order to ensure safety and encourage respect. Students are involved in activities that give them a sense of responsibility for their school. Teachers manage classrooms and plan instruction to prevent misconduct in order to focus on achievement. The school facility is pleasant, clean, colorful, and well-maintained.

Strategies that may enhance a safe and orderly environment include:

(1) school-wide discipline plan
(2) written notification to parents of discipline plan
(3) time-out room/alternative measures
(4) positive reinforcement of expected behavior
(5) well-maintained physical plant

The principal's leadership is fundamental to the direction and effectiveness of a school (Lieberman, 1984). The focus of this leadership is teaching and learning. The characteristics and qualities of individual principals may differ, and various school situations may require varying forms of leadership; but "It is the principal who leads the staff and school that is considered the effective principal." (Goodman, 1985)

The effective instructional leader may:

(1) set high and realistic standards for performance.
(2) regularly observes instructional settings.
(3) actively pursues a program of professional development for himself and his staff.
(4) conduct fair and meaningful evaluations.
(5) promote leadership among his staff.
(6) resolve conflict fairly and consistently.
(7) understand the district and community expectations.

Major research studies on school effectiveness identify high expectations as one of the significant correlates associated with student achievement (Eaker, 1984). Increased achievement is more likely when schoolwide policies reflect high expectations concerning student achievement, behavior and responsibility, and when sound instructional practices recognize identified goals and the needs of individual learners. Effective schools are characterized by the belief that all students can learn.

High expectations are evident in a school setting when:

(1) students receive course summaries for each subject.
(2) students and staff expect to be successful academically, personally, and socially.
(3) there are clearly written goals for students that reflect high expectations for progress.
(4) each teacher expects students to complete classwork and homework.
(5) public awards and incentives at every level of instruction are provided for both students and staff.

(6) opportunities for students to demonstrate responsibility are provided.

Brookover, et. al., (1982) indentify the major factors that influence a student's opportunity to learn as absenteeism, length of the school day and year, orderliness of the school, teacher managerial skills and methods of instruction, student attentiveness, and curriculum decisions. Teachers provide optimum learning time for their students through careful planning, clear presentation of subject matter, and flexible grouping procedures. Practice activities, including homework, allow students to repeat, assimilate, and apply what has been taught.

Students' opportunity to learn will be increased when:

(1) attendance by students and staff is high.
(2) disruptions to allocated and engaged learning time are minimal.
(3) during class time, students are successfully engaged in planned, meaningful, success oriented activities.
(4) homework is assigned regularly.

Frequent monitoring of student progress is essential to the development and maintenance of an effective learning climate. In effective schools, students are able to demonstrate that they have learned what the school wanted them to learn (Lezotte, 1984).

Indicators of successful monitoring of student progress may include:

(1) school records that clearly document student performance.
(2) placement of students using all available test data.
(3) systematic assessment of student achievement by using nationally validated measures, criterion referenced measures, standardized tests, and locally generated curriculum based measures.
(4) a variety of methods to communicate student progress (i.e. report cards, interim reports, weekly or daily reports, parent conferences, etc.).

Quality schools communicate with their parents and community by a variety of formal and informal methods. This communication or partnership is the key to involving all members of the school community in successful collaborative efforts aimed at forwarding the school's mission.

A home/school partnership will be formed when:

(1) the mission of the school has been communicated to parents.
(2) there is an active parent-teacher group(s), volunteer program, and/or parent education programs.
(3) there is regular communication with parents.
(4) the school is available for community use.

Effective teachers combine skills with the art and science of teaching to increase the learning success of their students. They understand that effective

teaching and successful student learning are based upon a planned, predetermined curriculum. They plan instruction, minimize student misconduct, develop lessons, and make clear instructional presentations which motivate interest and explain issues. Effective teachers evaluate their instruction and their students' progress and success. They are continually providing feedback that allows students to understand their mistakes, their successes, and their personal capabilities.

Indicators of effective teaching are:

(1) Teachers' plans for instruction incorporate what is to be learned or relearned, how it is to be taught, and how learning will be assessed.
(2) Teachers effectively manage student conduct.
(3) Teachers systematically organize and develop instruction.
(4) Teachers use effective strategies and techniques for presenting the subject matter to be learned.
(5) Teachers utilize systematic and appropriate methods for evaluation of student achievement.
(6) Teachers receive timely renewal of their professional skills.

The conditions and concepts of the effective school have the greatest value as a design for school improvement when viewed as a comprehensive system of interactive and overlapping factors. Each of the factors has a value as a single element contributing to school effectiveness and improved learning. When applied as a system, however, the influencing power of all of the characteristics is significantly greater than the use of the components individually.

School improvement is neither a new concept nor a new reality. School improvement activities have always been in place at the middle level. It seems that the new emphasis in this direction only validates that any endeavor directed toward improving the quality of middle level education is a continuous process.

It is important to keep in mind, according to Lezotte (Lee Co., FL, 1988), that there exists no status quo in public education; either a school is improving or it is in decline.

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